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ABSTRACT

Modelling its self-study on earlier document availability research by Saracevic, Shaw, and Kantor, the Periodical Department of the William Paterson College Library (Wayne, New Jersey), evaluated service to its patrons. Specially modified and coded periodical request forms were collected from a sample of patrons who requested periodicals from the closed periodicals stacks. The data showed that the largest group of users in the sample (67%) was composed of undergraduates, and that 90% of those sampled reported success in obtaining the material they had requested. The data was also used to examine "errors" or non-receipt of requested materials, and the reasons for those errors. It was concluded, however, that a 90% success rate for closed stacks was less than should be considered optimal, and several recommendations are made for improvements. The text is supplemented by one figure and three tables. A copy of the periodical request form used for data collection, and a list of definitions of the error categories are appended. (3 references) (Author/EW)

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USING DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY RESEARCH IN A LIBRARY SELF-STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Modelling its self-study on earlier document availability research by Saracevic, Shaw, and Kantor, the William Paterson College Library's Periodicals Department evaluated service to its patrons. The design of the study provided the author with a quantitative measure of library performance based on outcomes of patron requests at the Periodicals Service Desk and permitted specific recommendations for remediation activity.

USING DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY RESEARCH IN A LIBRARY SELF-STUDY

In the summer of 1984 a committee of four William Paterson College librarians met to discuss the possibility of designing a self-study to be used to evaluate library performance. These initial discussions noted the outcome of such a study, if properly planned, could provide the information necessary to improve the Library service to its patrons. As such the Committee determined the criteria necessary for the research activity should center on the need to 1) identify relative detrimental impact of library weaknesses on users, 2) evaluate a variety of functions which were used by a large number of patrons, and 3) conduct the study as a management tool for future procedural or policy changes.

Various research methodologies were examined to identify those which would best match the selected criteria and a document availability study developed by Saracevic, Shaw, and Kantor and later modified by Ciliberti was chosen for the Committee model. This method provides a quantitative measure of library performance based on the outcomes of patron card catalog searches--producing both an overall measure of library performance and a series of discrete performance measures based on sequential steps the patron must take in order to finally locate items on the library shelves.

While acknowledging that the monograph collection would be the major emphasis of the self-study, the Committee decided to

also undertake a similar but smaller study with the periodical/ microform collection. This would be designed using the same theoretical base and methodology as the larger card catalog study and would enable the Committee to calculate a performance measure for one major department in the Library.

The journals in the Periodicals Department at William Paterson College are in a closed stack collection. A patron uses the printed WPC Periodical Directory located in the public reading room to determine if the Library owns a particular title and if it has the volumes or issues desired, fills out a periodical request form, and gives it to a Departmental staff member at the service desk who then locates the item. As in the card catalog study several discrete and sequential steps must be overcome by the patron in order to obtain desired materials. The results of this activity can then be measured and analyzed. Figure 1 represents these individual steps. The remainder of this paper describes the periodicals portion of the self-study.

METHOD

The basis of the study was to be the patron population coming to the periodical service desk. Rather than attempt to study all requests in a given year or semester, the Committee decided to use a sample of patrons during the 1985 fall semester. This sample was to represent all users in the same proportion as they requested periodical materials from the Department. Thus the sample subset would be distributed by hour of the day, day of the week, day, and week of the semester in

the same proportion as the patron population as a whole.

In order to identify the required sample, a preliminary study was undertaken in the fall of 1984. Each patron coming to the service desk between the first day of the semester and the last was counted using an industrial timeclock. At the end of the semester the data on the 10,000 Periodical Department patrons was sorted into each of the one-half hour time slots that the Library was open and a program was written using an IBM PC to randomly select the desired sample by hour, day, and week of the semester from the patron population.

The sample size was selected using the Galtung Cell Size Method. That is, the variables to be analyzed were determined and a grid drawn. The number of resulting cells was multiplied by ten so that at least ten cases would fall into each cell. The variables selected were four identifying academic status (undergraduate, graduate, faculty, other) and four representing type of failure encountered (patron error, library malfunction, publication or mailing errors, retrieving errors). This made necessary a sample size of 160.

The data were to be collected on specially modified and coded periodical request forms. (See Appendix A) The first patron approaching during a sampled time slot was to be informed that the Periodicals Department was conducting a study to determine how well it was satisfying the needs of its patrons. It would be explained to the patron that the request form for the study was identical to those currently being used by all persons obtaining journals from the Periodicals Department with

the exception of a single question which asked if the material received had been used.

The entire Departmental staff as well as the 15 student assistants were to be involved in the distribution and collection of the forms and each were informed of the importance of the study and the need for accuracy in each step. To this end, a weekly schedule was posted on the bulletin board next to the service desk to assure distribution of forms, printed directions for the staff were taped to the desk, and the forms to be used each day were coded for time and placed in a prominent location. Errors in distribution were noted and staff or student assistants responsible were individually contacted by the Department Head to assure quality control. Consequently, of the 160 forms scheduled for distribution, 146 (91%) were given to patrons at the appropriate times. Fourteen of those 146 were either not returned by the patrons or were incomplete. The 132 returned and usable forms represented a 90% return rate.

Each weekday morning the Periodical Department Head analyzed the previous day's completed forms in order to guarantee that the reason marked by the Department staff for unfilled requests was accurately determined.

RESULTS

The data in Table 1 indicate that the greatest number of patrons using the Periodicals Department at William Paterson College Library are undergraduates. Eighty-eight of the 132 (67%) sampled patrons were identified as undergraduates--not

surprising in a largely undergraduate institution. The second largest group of users were graduate students with 25 (19%). The 14 (10%) who identified themselves as "other" were either College staff members, local high school students, visiting college students from other campuses, or friends of WPC students. The smallest group of sampled patrons were the 5 faculty members who constituted only 4% of the total. Interestingly, the percentages for each of these categories mirrored those noted in the concurrent card catalog study.

As can be seen in Table 2, the overall success rate of the patrons was calculated as 90%: that is, 119 of the 132 patrons received the material that they had requested. Although this appears to be a high rate of success, it is important to remember that in a closed stack system the success ratio should be close to 100%. When the success rate was further analyzed by academic status it was found the undergraduates were most successful in obtaining requested materials (94%). However, the small cell sizes made it impossible to determine if this was statistically significant.

The data in Table 3 illustrates the error categories listed in the order in which the patrons would have encountered them and notes the success ratio at each step of the process. Definitions of these categories are located in Appendix B.

One hundred thirty-two patrons approached the service desk with a completed request form. Of this number, 8 persons were unable to obtain the periodical requested either because the Library did not own the title or it did not have the volume

and/or issue desired. Thus, 124 persons had correct information concerning the Library's holdings and should have been able to obtain their requested material. However, of these persons one individual needed a journal issue that had not yet arrived from the publisher and 4 of the 123 patrons remaining encountered library malfunctions--materials misfiled, items not claimed, etc. The total failure rate was 10%.

One of the major benefits in using the research methodology described above was the capability it offered to determine the impact of various procedures and/or policies on patron failure rates. Thus the category of patron error which had a 94% success ratio was the one in which corrective remediation would have the greatest impact. This would be followed by the Library malfunction category (97%).

Accordingly, the 13 errors were further analyzed with special emphasis on the 8 patron errors. These errors consisted of 4 requests for journals the Library did not own and 4 requests for issues or volumes which were not included in the Department's holdings of that title. In each case the Periodical Directory located in the public reference area had recorded accurately the Library's holdings so it must be assumed that the patrons either did not use the Directory or were unable to understand the information printed in it.

Of the 4 Library malfunction errors, 3 were the result of misfiled or misshelved materials. One requested issue had not been received and no claim had been sent to the publisher to obtain it.

A question on the reverse side of the request form asked the patrons if they had used the material they had received. An unexpected finding resulted from this question: 9 of the 83 (11%) undergraduates who had been successful in obtaining requested journals had not used the material after they had received it because it was "inappropriate," "not the right information," "not helpful," and so forth. No other user category noted this difficulty. The reason for this occurrence would have to be assumed since no further questions were asked of the patrons regarding their citations or information sources. However, it might be suggested that they were less practised and sophisticated in locating helpful indexes and/or bibliographic sources than their graduate or faculty counterparts. Additionally, the sources they may have been using (e.g., Wilson Indexes) are less likely to have abstracts or very descriptive records.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The 90% success ratio in this study could lead a department manager to a false sense of security. In a closed stack setting, however, 90% is not good enough. Further, it should be noted that the only journal requests individuals brought to the service desk were for materials that patrons determined the Library owned. Thus an unknown number of additional persons could be considered unsuccessful since the titles they wanted were not even listed in the Periodical Directory. These patrons either left the Library unsatisfied or settled for materials

they regarded as of lesser desirability. Research designed with a different focus would be necessary to overcome this limitation in the study.

The methodology designed for this research, however, and the ensuing implementation resulted in information that can be effectively translated into improved Library and Periodical Department procedures. The following actions should be considered top priority:

Library-wide recommendations:

1. Bibliographic instruction classes must emphasize the purpose and correct use of the Periodicals Directory.
2. All librarians in contact with students--either in the classroom or at the reference desk--should recognize the need to instruct patrons in use of appropriate indexes and bibliographies for locating information they are seeking.

Periodical Department recommendations:

1. Stack maintenance procedures should be revised so that books and paper issues will not appear to be missing when patrons request them.
2. Microfiche and microfilm drawers must be placed on a schedule of routine shelf reading to eliminate misfiled items.
3. A revised Periodicals Directory format should be planned to allow easier patron use.

An interesting sidelight at this point is the relative

merit of developing criteria to include a claiming function for an automated serials control system in a Periodicals Department designed such as the one at William Paterson College. Because more than 3/4 of the Department's current subscriptions are also ordered in microform copy and consequently not bound, the process of claiming of issues not received has been eliminated if titles were expected to be received in microfiche or microfilm within a few months. If only one patron in 132 (.8%) is unsuccessful in obtaining materials because of an unclaimed journal issue, it may be that claiming--either using automated or manual procedures--, except for titles to be bound or with very high use patterns, is not a cost effective use of periodical staff time.

A self-study such as the one designed for the William Paterson College Periodicals Department is not difficult to plan or execute. Once the user population is determined, it is possible to carry out the research with a minimum of staff and user interruption; however, the information obtained allows insight into the relative weaknesses of departmental or library routines and provides the basis for corrective action. Regular follow-ups of the study should be incorporated into departmental plans to ascertain the effectiveness of any remedial action.

REFERENCES

T. Saracevic, W.M. Shaw, Jr. and P.B. Kantor, "Causes and Dynamics of User Frustration in an Academic Library," College and Research Libraries, 38 (January 1977): 7-18.

Anne C. Ciliberti, "The Development and Methodological Study of an Instrument for Measuring Material Availability in Libraries" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1985).

Johan Galtung, "Theory and Methods of Social Research. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1067).

APPENDIX A

WPC PERIODICALS REQUEST FORM

To be filled out completely before bringing to Periodicals Assistant.

1. Complete name of journal/newspaper

   _____

   _____

2. Volume_____

   Page numbers_____

   Date of issue_____
   month year

3. The Directory reorts that this issue is:
   _____Microfiche .
   _____Microfilm
   _____Does not say (Paper copy)

4. Print your last name_____
   _____student
   _____faculty/staff
   _____Non-WPC

PERIODICALS MAY NOT BE TAKEN FROM THE LIBRARY

Front of Form

Graduate Faculty_____
Undergraduate_____ Other_____

SUCCESSFUL SEARCH
I used this material_____

I did not use this material_____

Reason_____

_____

UNSUCCESSFUL SEARCH

P/E
* Don't own publication _____
* Don't own yer/volume _____

Malfunction
* In use _____
* At bindery _____
* Vandalized _____
Kardex wrong _____
Directory wrong _____
Claim not sent _____
Claim sent/not received _____
Missing or misshelved _____

Other
* Issue not arrived _____

R/E _____

Back of Form

APPENDIX B

DEFINITIONS OF ERROR CATEGORIES

PATRON ERROR--These errors occur when a patron requests a periodical which was not in the Library's collection--either the title has not been purchased or the existing holdings do not include the issue or volume desired by the patron. These are considered Patron Errors because the Periodicals Directory available in the reading room correctly identifies the Departmental holdings.

PUBLISHING OR MAILING ERROR--These errors result from a journal being delayed in its publication or slow in arriving because of delivery problems. The requested journal would legitimately have been expected to be in the collection but it has not yet arrived.

LIBRARY MALFUNCTION--These errors occur when the Periodicals Directory gives the patron inaccurate information concerning Departmental holdings, when a claim has not been sent for a missing issue; when material has been vandalized and not replaced; when a title is in use and no second copy is available; when material is missing or misshelved.

RETRIEVAL ERROR--A retrieval error is one in which a library staff member or student assistant is unable to locate requested material from the periodical book stacks or microform drawer although it has been shelved or filed where it belongs.

FIGURE 1

Branching Analysis of

Periodical Searches

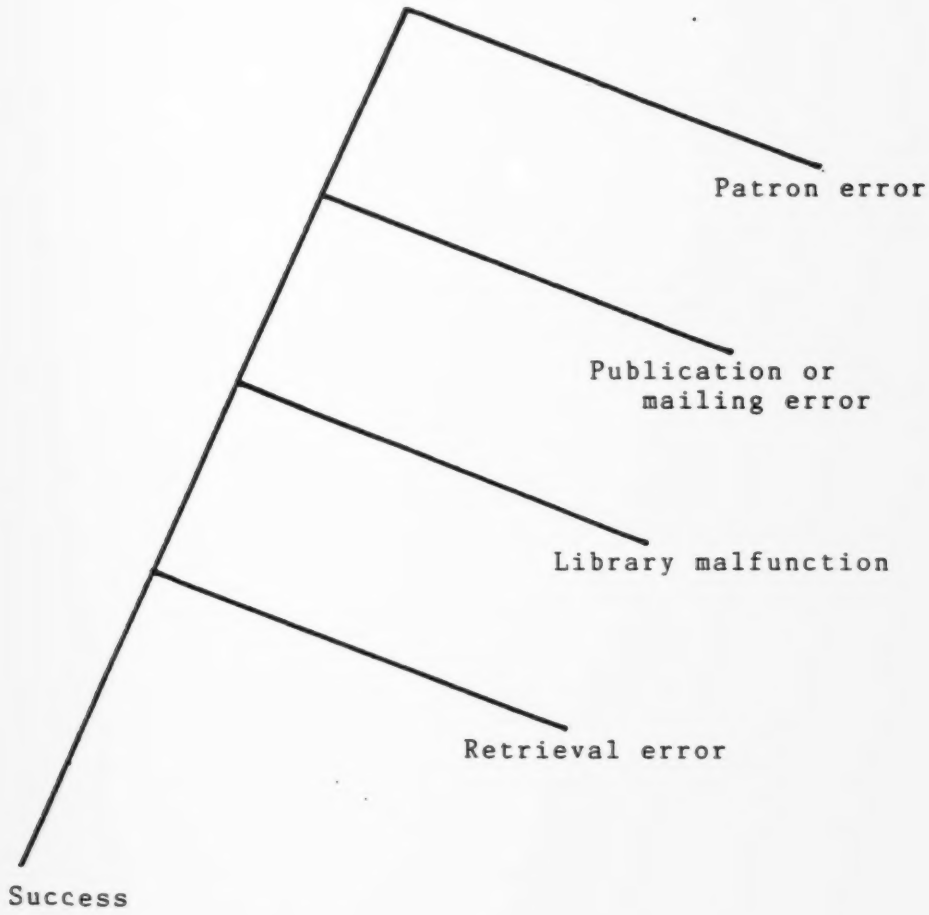

TABLE 1

Patron Profile

Academic Status	Number of Patrons
Undergraduates	88 (67%)
Graduates	25 (19%)
Faculty	5 (4%)
Other	14 (10%)
Total	132 (100%)

TABLE 2

Analysis of Success Rate by Academic Status

Academic Status	Success	Failure	Total (%)
Undergraduate	83 (94%)	5 (6%)	88 (100%)
Graduate	20 (80%)	5 (20%)	25 (100%)
Faculty	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)
Other	12 (85%)	2 (15%)	14 (100%)
Total	119 (90%)	13 (10%)	132 (100%)

TABLE 3

Search Performance by Type of Error and Success Ratio

Type of Error	Number of Errors	Total Patrons Searching	Success Ratio
Patron error	8	132	94%
Publication or mailing errors	1	124	99%
Library malfunction	4	123	97%
Retrieval error	0	119	100%

Total errors: 13
Total searches: 132
Percent errors: 10%